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C O N F I D E N T I A L SECTION 01 OF 02 PARIS 000468

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STATE FOR NEA/IR, DRL/NESCA

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SUBJECT: FRENCH MFA VIEWS ON IMMINENT IRANIAN PARLIAMENTARY
ELECTIONS

REF: STATE 25587

Classified By: Political Minister Counselor Josiah Rosenblatt for reasons 1.4. (b), (d).

1. (C) We passed reftel message to French MFA Iran desk officer Arnaud Pescheux, along with NEA/IR's draft press statement, on March 12. In his response on March 13, Pescheux noted the following:

--France shares fully our concern about the selection of candidates. French estimates of the numbers involved are 2692 candidates out of 7168 were disqualified.

--Further to Pescheux's February 27 meeting with NEA/IR desk officer Carolyn Coberly (see below), France believes the Iranians would best receive criticism of their elections if it commented more on the restriction of candidates than on the overall result. Pescheux believes the draft statement separately passed by unclassified e-mail conforms with that spirit, although he asked whether a reference to "international monitoring" might stir up "Iranian patriotism."

--Although France anticipates irregularities in the vote itself, it would prefer to cite such irregularities only if and when there is tangible evidence supporting the assertion that such activity has occurred. We reminded Pescheux that that part of the guidance was only intended to be used if it was believed such irregularities had taken place.

--Pescheux also referred to the brevity of the electoral campaign, the choice of dates in conjunction with important holidays, and the prohibition on publishing and distributing photos and electoral posters as additional elements we might consider highlighting.

--The European Union is reflecting on the timing and wording of its own statement. Pescheux initially thought that the EU would prefer to wait until the second round so as not to "insult" the voters by reacting before the final results were in, but he later indicated that sentiment was rapidly growing in favor of a statement after the first round.

2. (C) For the record, we note that Pescheux met on February 27 with visiting NEA/IR desk officer Carolyn Coberly for a general exchange of views on the upcoming elections and public diplomacy efforts vis-a-vis Iran. He indicated then that France would likely have to criticize the parliamentary

elections but would seek to do so on a "factual, careful basis." This would likely follow the second round of voting and not the first. Coberly responded that it was unlikely the USG would wait that long, since the process of organizing the elections has been marred by so many irregularities. She cited in particular the Guardian Council's exclusion of so many candidates and the absence of international observers to evaluate the vote.

¶3. (C) Pescheux agreed with Coberly's point that the net result was that Iranians would not be able to choose their elected representatives in a free and fair way. He suggested French criticisms of the elections would focus on (1) the disqualification of so many candidates (at least 2000 out of 7000, half of whom were considered "reformists") on the basis of "questionable criteria" and (2) the brevity of the campaign. Sandwiched between major holidays, Pescheux said that six days was not long enough for a "real campaign." He hoped that a focus on the factual aspects of the polls' failings would make it harder for the Iranian government to reject the criticism. The cause and effect link between the limitation on candidacies and the expected overwhelming election of radical or hardline candidates should be clear to everyone and undermine the credibility of these elections.

¶4. (C) Coberly noted that the USG is seeking to emphasize the flawed nature of the process over the results themselves. She explained that this was in part intended to dispel the impression that the USG supported the reformists as a group. Pescheux again mostly agreed with Coberly's central argument. The French embassy in Tehran believes that the regime actually has little need to manipulate the results of the election because it already manipulates the process, and this

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will largely determine the outcome. When Coberly asked about anticipated voter turnout, Pescheux stated that low voter turnout, i.e., less than 50 percent, helped the hardliners. This, in his opinion, helped explain the short campaign period since it would restrict reformist efforts to mobilize electoral support.

¶5. (C) At several points in the conversation, Pescheux referred to the challenge France would face getting the EU to agree to a common statement on the elections. He cited the failure in 2006 to draft a statement, in conjunction with Germany and the UK, on the Assembly of Experts election that was acceptable to the full membership. Although Pescheux imagined that the results of Iran's parliamentary elections will be plainly evident and flawed, it would likely fall to France, the UK, and Germany again to take the lead in drafting a common statement.

¶6. (C) Looking beyond the elections, Pescheux agreed with Coberly that they would likely have little impact on the nuclear issue, since hardliners were using that issue to consolidate their grip on power. Pescheux argued that reformists, who are in any case difficult to categorize, are extremely restricted in terms of the subjects about which they can express a sharply divergent opinion. The general public support of the regime's nuclear policy has made it a "bipartisan" issue. Despite the clear negative effects it is having on the economy, no one questions Iran's policy of pursuing its nuclear program. Even if, as Pescheux expected, there was a weakening of the hardliners' position to the benefit of the moderates and reformers, it would have little overall effect since the Majlis has no significant power with respect to foreign affairs. Coberly agreed, although the parliamentary elections would give some clue as to the state of the different factions that will vie for power during the 2009 presidential election.

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